

The Challenges and Importance of Teaching Effective Business Writing to EFL Students

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Abstract

Writing, in general requires conscious effort and much practice in composing, developing, and analyzing ideas. Students writing in a second language are also faced with social and cognitive challenges related to second language acquisition. The Article explores some of the challenges of in particular business writing in English and once again emphasizes the importance of teaching effective business writing to EFL Students for their better career opportunities and further success.

Keywords: Effective; composing; editing; analyzing; business correspondence; reader-friendly environment

Introduction

Language is the principal means of communication. To the manager it is very important, because there is no communication unless the receiver of the written communication understands the thoughts and ideas of the writer.

The basic purpose of any written communication is to convey a message to the reader. To serve this purpose well, the message must be easily understood and quickly read.

A well-written document approaches the subject logically and shows the writer has a thorough knowledge of the subject. The message is simple, clear, and direct.

The ability to write well is not a naturally acquired skill; it is usually learned or culturally transmitted as a set of practices in formal instructional settings or other environments. Writing skills must be practiced and learned through experience. Writing also involves composing, which implies the ability either to tell or retell pieces of information in the form of narratives or description, or to transform information into new texts, as in expository or argumentative writing.

We all understand that being able to write in a clear and professional style is important to your business. For most people, business writing is simply a challenging and overwhelming task. In this type of writing, there

are so many factors that you need to take into consideration just to get your message across.

The decision to use a written rather than oral communication often rests with the manager - the communicator. In such cases, the communicator must weigh the advantages and disadvantages of each form of communication in order to make an intelligent decision.

The advantage of oral over written communications is that a complete interchange of thoughts and ideas can take place faster. The speaker is in direct contact with the listener (receiver) and is challenged to make himself understood. Too frequently the listener fails to ask the right questions, so he does not receive the message clearly. This, in turn, can result in wasted efforts and costly errors.

Written communications also have advantages. They are usually more carefully formulated than oral communications, so the message conveyed tends to be more clearly stated. Written messages also can be retained as references or legal records.

There are some disadvantages to written communications. First, the writer often fails to carefully compose his thoughts and ideas. When a poorly prepared message has to be followed by many written or oral communications to clarify the writer's original written word, the real message becomes garbled and the process becomes costly and time-consuming.

Second, people tend to retain voluminous written documentation for use as a means of defense or attack. A file of such documentation is often referred to as a "Pearl Harbor file." The advantages of written information for legal purposes are usually obvious; however there are occasions when such information is either duplicative or unnecessary. Effective managers recognize the importance of document retention and develop sensible procedures and practices for that purpose.

The most important question that you, as a manager-and writer-can ask yourself is, "Have I stated my message clearly?" If you are to be an effective writer, you must do a good job of informing the intended receiver of your message. There is nothing more important to you, if you wish to be an effective manager, than being informative and properly understood.

A message that is easy to understand is informative. This does not imply that it is "readable"; i.e., easy to read. In recent years there have been many presentations or articles on readability. These articles have offered some simple solutions to common writing problems, such as: use everyday words, short sentences, and brief paragraphs; keep the "fog content" down; don't use complicated or foreign expressions, overworked phrases, and unfamiliar jargon. Compliance with this advice may appear to be quite simple, but cannot be considered a panacea for all writing problems. Strict

adherence to the advice in these articles does not ensure that your next staff paper or report will be informative. Informative writing involves paying proper attention to the choice of words, construction of sentences, and logical presentation of thoughts and ideas.

The meanings assigned to words have two characteristics - denotation and connotation. Denotation is the meaning or idea conveyed by the word through common usage; connotation is the thought (personal or emotional) attributed to the word. "Democracy," for example, generally has a denotative meaning. From a connotative aspect, its meaning is much broader. In trying to communicate effectively - in writing as well as speaking - we risk being misunderstood. We can only hope to know the common meanings (the denotative characteristics) of most frequently used words. Unfortunately this is not always a simple task. The uniqueness of a word should be known by the writer when he chooses it to convey an idea. The importance of selecting the right word has been recognized since biblical times. In Proverbs 25:11 we find the statement that words fitly spoken (or written) are like "apples of gold in pictures of silver."

Despite of the advantages of written communication a number of business people make a number of mistakes when they are writing. Here are some of the main ones.

The first big mistake I've noticed is that writers tend to write for themselves and not for their readers. But readers don't have the same understanding of the subject, the same objectives and the same interests as the writer. So, if you don't think of the reader's needs as you write, you simply won't engage them.

Secondly, I've noticed that writers often fail to make their point early on. You need to bear in mind that readers are busy people. If you bury the important point halfway down the page, they may never get that far.

The third common error is failing to stick to the point. As you are writing, something else occurs to you and you veer off at a tangent, exploring another interesting but not vital subject area. This lack of focus is confusing for the reader as it blurs the key message.

Poor structure is the fourth frequent problem in business writing – and it occurs because people fail to plan before they write. If the structure of a document is poor, readers will not be able to follow what you are saying. Again, they may give up before they reach the main point you are trying to communicate.

But structure isn't just about organising the content in a logical sequence. Many business documents are poorly structured at a deeper level. To write well you have to consider the structure of your paragraphs and your sentences. Structure is a vital part of your reader's experience, they won't particularly notice if it is good, but they will be most confused if it's bad.

Correct grammar and punctuation are major hurdles for many business writers. The nuts and bolts of writing really do matter – both to make your meaning clear and to support the image you are trying to create of a competent person who knows what they want to say.

Last but not least in this list of problems is the failure to write clearly and simply. Years ago most people in business thought that elaborate, jargon-filled written language helped to communicate and enhance their status. But if you write like that today, your meaning will not be clear and people will think that you are stuffy and old-fashioned. So get rid of the bureaucratic words and phrases and just try to write more as you would speak.

Effective Business Writing for Success

Reports, emails, plans, minutes, articles and presentations: business writers have to write any of these, and write them well. Poor writing causes irritation and lost opportunities. Good writing saves time and gives your organisation a professional image.

Teaching effective business writing will give your students the skills definitely useful in their further career and confidence to make the right impact, no matter which kinds of documents you have to compose.

There are eight reasons why we should care about teaching effective business writing to EFL students:

1. Everyone writes.

With a computer in every office and lab and at every worksite, employees in all disciplines are required to write. Yet few have learned to write effectively. Many U.S. employers believe that only about a third of their employees actually have the writing skills most valued by the organization, according to surveys published in 2004 and 2005.

2. Everyone sends email.

For tasks that formerly meant picking up the phone or meeting in person, people now send email. The surveys linked above have shown that 98+ percent of U.S. companies and state governments use email to communicate "frequently" or "almost always." Yet in a recent survey conducted by Information Mapping, 40 percent of respondents stated that they wasted 30 minutes or more each day because of ineffectively written email.

3. Readers have changed.

Our readers used to be down the hall or across the country. Now they speak English as a second, third, or fourth language, and they work around the globe. An estimated 1.4 billion people use English in business communication, yet only 400 million of them are native English speakers.

Having a global reading audience places new demands on writers. Your writing should be reader-friendly to get the best outcome.

4. Schools don't teach business writing.

Colleges and universities require undergraduates to take composition and rhetoric--not business writing. Graduate schools require research papers and dissertations---not persuasive proposals and action-oriented email. Academic writing is different from business writing. (Email me for an article describing how it is different, with tips and strategies for making the shift to business writing.)

5. Even highly talented associates may not write well to varied audiences.

Data analysts may write perfect reports for other analysts. Engineers give the right detailed findings to their fellow engineers. But when any employees communicate outside their peer group--let's say, to senior executives or customers--they need special skills to organize information, eliminate jargon, and focus on their readers' needs.

6. Smart software doesn't ensure smart writing.

Templates, wizards, spell-checking, and grammar-checking do not guarantee documents that are clear, concise, strategic, and focused on the reader's needs. Unfortunately, software builds false security--not strong documents. When company administrators say, "We have the budget for only essential classes like software training," those who care about writing need to respond, "But what do employees do with the software they learn to use? They compute, design, analyze, and write."

7. Bad writing is as damaging as bad customer service and bad products.

Everyone has horror stories describing situations like these:

Ineffective, embarrassing messages are sent to customers, clients, and other stakeholders.

Time and money are squandered to rectify writing errors--sometimes in court.

Proposals fail when writers don't meet readers' expectations or deadlines.

Supervisors and managers waste time editing and rewriting documents.

Employees miss out on opportunities to contribute. They don't write proposals, recommendations, and other important documents when they lack skills and confidence.

8. Good writing can do great things.

Effective reports, proposals, requests, assessments, and other business documents can:

Get results.

Inspire action, confidence, and commitment.

Sell products and services.

Create and maintain goodwill.

Save time and other resources.

Lead to personal fulfillment and professional success.

Therefore, how can we support EFL students to excel at business writing?

1. Establish your objectives. This is by far the most important element in business writing. Before you start tapping on your keyboard, think of the things that you would like to achieve in writing your business communications. Would you like to inform? Would you like people to take action? Would you like to reprimand somebody? Would you like to motivate your people? If you cannot establish an objective for your message, then there is really no point in taking up your audience's time with it, right?

2. Define your audience. You need to know ahead of time the people to whom you are writing your messages for. You need to know their level of comprehension, their language, and the things that can push their buttons. Knowing these people inside and out can help you choose the best strategies and writing techniques so you can easily get your message across with minimal or no confusion at all.

3. Anticipate questions. Know all the questions that your audience might have when reading your messages. Make sure that you answer all the who, what, why, where, when, and how questions of these people to promote better understanding.

4. Create a draft. After collecting and putting your thoughts into writing, have an objective third party to read it. This is very important so you can determine if you have the right tone, the right words, and the right information. Consider revising your draft to make it more appropriate to the audience that you are serving.

5. Keep it simple. You really don't need to sound like a rocket scientist when doing business writing. Keep in mind that your main goal is to inform and this will not possibly happen if you make it extremely difficult for your audience to understand you. Use terms that your audience are familiar with and define highly technical terms before using them on your content.

6. Keep it short. More and more people have limited attention span these days. If really want your target audience to read your messages in their entirety, I highly recommend that you make all your messages short, brief, and to the point.

Conclusion:

To conclude we need to constantly tell our students that the only way to improve their writing is to keep writing--thinking that with enough practice in writing and revision (involving problem solving and reflection),

they would eventually acquire the fundamentals, or at least the standard, required of academic discourse. We also need to convince our students that the basic purpose of any written communication is to convey a message to the reader. To serve this purpose well, the message must be easily understood and quickly read. Besides this, a well-written document approaches the subject logically and shows the writer has a thorough knowledge of the subject. The message is simple, clear, and direct.

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